

〈資 料〉

An Interview with P. N. Cumararatunga on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Palavinnage Nandanapala Cumararatunga, a free-lance writer, is the editor of DANA, the international journal of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

He was born on June 21, 1922, at Katukurunde in the Habaraduwa area of the Galle district in southwest Sri Lanka.

As a child he attended the Dharminka School, Katukurunde, where the language of instruction was Sinhala.

He obtained his pre-university education in English at St. Aloysius College, Galle; Christ Church College, Baddegama; Mahinda College, Galle; St. Servatius College, Matara; and Rohana Vidyalaya, Matara.

Under private tutors in Galle, he studied for an Inter Arts examination, London University, and qualified in English, Sinhala, Pali and geography in 1948.

From 1949 to 1951, at the Pembroke Academy, Colombo, he read for his B. A., London University, in English, Sinhala and geography.

In 1952 he entered the University of Colombo, where he read English, Sinhala and economics for his First in Arts.

He passed the London University B. A. examinations in Constitutional Law, Constitutional History and Sinhala in 1954.

For fifteen years he was a teacher of English in Sri Lankan schools: Anuruddha College, Nawalapitiya, 1954; Dharmaja College, Kandy, 1955; Vidyakara Vidyalaya, Maharagama, 1958-1961; Sri Lanka Vidyalaya,

Maradana, 1961–1967. In two of these schools he was an athletics and cricket coach.

In 1967 he gave up the teaching profession and joined the Independent Group of newspapers as a journalist. He served as sub—editor of *The Sun*, the Independent Group’s daily English language newspaper. He later joined the Lake House Group of newspapers. He worked as a sub— editor on both *Janata*, a Sinhala daily, and the *Daily News*, an English language newspaper. *

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ROBINSON: As far as aspects of culture is concerned, who among fiction writers is being talked about these days in Sri Lanka?

CUMARANATUNGA: Eileen Siriwardena’s novels have become quite popular. She writes in Sinhala but has done an English version of one of her novels. Her work has a special appeal for girls and young women 15 to 25 years of age. These readers are rather immature in taste, experience, values, and so forth. Her novels depict urban and semi—urban middle and upper middle class life in Sri Lanka. Siriwardena’s characterization and plot development are better than in some earlier novels, but they lack the earlier novels’ seriousness. Of course, Sri Lanka has never produced novels of any quality.

ROBINSON: That’s a severe judgment. Would you explain what you mean?

CUMARANATUNGA: I don’t have enough time to answer your question fully — and you would need another 25 pages of space, if I did. Perhaps we could attempt it later.

* This is the third part of an interview the first part of which was published in Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 27, No. 1, July 1986, and the second part in Tonan Asia Kenkyu Nenpo, Vol. 29, December 1987.

ROBINSON: Then, among male novelists, who is currently of interest?

CUMARANATUNGA: I'd like to mention two who have attained local recognition. Somaweera Senanayake and Kulasekera Fonseka. Both have won the Saahitya Award for the best novel more than once. In one of his recent novels, *Menik Nadiya Galabasi* (The River of Gems Flows Along), Senanayake deals with the "gem world". An ambitious young man who runs a tea boutique, a tea shop, hands over the management of the place to his wife and joins the gem rush. Affluence intoxicates the couple. The moral values that guided them earlier lose their grip on them. They begin to imitate the elite society. Kulasekera Fonseka's best-known novels are *Nelanna Beri Mal* (Flowers That Cannot Be Culled), *Paalama Yata* (Under the Bridge), and *Viya Sidura* (Hole in the Yoke). In these novels he deals with suffering urban people. He depicts how these people struggle to survive. Let me add that in Sinhala the word Saahitya embodies literature, song, music, dancing, art, crafts. This is why my uncle Munidasa Cumararatunga coined the word *liviseriya*, creative writing, to mean literature.

ROBINSON: What were some of the earlier more serious novels you are referring to?

CUMARANATUNGA: In the 1970s, Jayantha Herath's *Sandun Aratuwa*, for example. The title refers to the hard core of the sandalwood tree. This suggests a character of sterling quality. The novel focuses on the landlessness and the land hunger of the peasantry in Sri Lanka. The time is the 1960s. A peasant occupies crown land, government land, and he cultivates it to eke out an existence. He's driven off the land by the police. He's jailed. The novel deals with real life problems facing a large proportion of the peasantry here.

Sunandra Mahendra Mel's *Hevaneli Eda Minissu* (Men with

Crooked Shadows) came out in the 70s too. It's narrated in the first person. A biographical novel about the disillusioning experience of a young man somewhat in the manner of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*. It portrays life in middle class society here. The method is direct and straight forward. Not stereotyped stuff.

In the 1960s, Madawala Ratnayake showed the clash of urban and rural values in *Akkara Paha* (Five Acres). A rural cultivator mortgages his land to educate his son in the city. The man loses his land. The son doesn't return to develop the land. Finally, the father obtains from the government five acres of land in a distant place.

The point is, all these stories are told in a convincing manner. They deal with true problems facing most of the people of this country. They're concerned with serious matters of life.

ROBINSON: Who in Sri Lanka reads these serious novels?

CUMARANATUNGA: They're read by teachers, university and school students, journalists, among others.

ROBINSON: Would you now comment in general about the motion picture scene in Sri Lanka?

CUMARANATUNGA: A landmark in the Sinhala cinema was produced in the mid 1950s. *Rekaawa* (Line). It focuses attention on Sinhalese rural life. It's the story of a child's tussle with destiny. Dr. Lester James Peiris was the director. The script writer was Titus Tottawatte. Willie Blake, the cameraman. All three possessed a reasonably sound knowledge of film technique. Titus Tottawatte was additionally endowed: he had mastered the Sinhala idiom. He was conscious of some aspects of its artistic vitality. Later, other pictures made their mark. *Kele Handa* (Jungle Moon). The experiences of a pretty village girl. *Sath Samudura* (Seven Oceans). The life of a fisher family that lives by the sea and struggles with the sea to eke out an existence. *Parasatu*

Mal. This refers to a kind of celestial flower. The film portrays the life of an affluent upper class country man who seduces many women. *Gam Peraliya* (The Revolution of the Village) about the changing social order of a village. After that, better quality films appeared. *Minisaa Saha Kaputa* (Covetousness of Man). Minisaa is man. Kaputa is crow. Man and Crow. A man's avarice is compared with a crow's. In *Sarungale* (Kite), a Tamil man helps Sinhalese children to fly kites. It's a plea for ethnic amity. *Siribo Ayiya*. This is the name of the hero of the movie. He's a carter by trade. His trials and tribulations are shown. At one stage he changes his occupation. These are all films of the 1960s and 1970s.

ROBINSON: What are some of the good movies that have appeared more recently in Sri Lanka? And the directors.

CUMARANATUNGA: *Welikatarata* (Desert), for one. Directed by D. B. Nihalsinghe. A struggle between a village boy and the son of a land owner. The focus is on the futility of the conflict. *Ahasaguwa*, directed by Dharmasena Pathiraja, for another. *Ahasa* is sky. *Gawuwa* is a fairly long unit of measurement. The film's an expression of hope for the future of the lower middle class and the urban poor. It deals with an economically depressed class, gutter people, their joblessness, their struggle to exist. One fellow finds a job as a municipal garbage lorry driver and attempts to live a more decent life. Stealing and pickpocketing are common. One of his friends tries to get away with the loot he has collected but meets with a motor car accident and dies. At his cremation, the lorry driver sees the smoke of his friend's burning corpse escape high into the air. He reflects on hopes, aspirations, the futility of life. At the end of the film, a demonstration led by a socialist group is seen passing by.

Dadayama (The Hunt) by writer-director Wasantha

Obesekera is a sex—crime story. A pretty village girl is duped and seduced on promise of marriage by a scheming urban man who is better off in life. The girl intends to improve her social status by marrying the man. But he has other ideas — to marry a richer woman of higher standing in society. The village girl has borne one of his children and is pregnant with another. She hunts for the man in the city. But he hunts her down first. She's murdered on the edge of a forest reserve.

Suddilaage Kataawa (The Story of a Beautiful Woman) by director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake is also full of crime, vice and injustice. The affluent, influential revenue officer cum police officer of the village is responsible for most of the sins here. He gets rid of any individual he suspects is a challenge to his authority. In the village there's a man who murders for money. The revenue officer employs this murderer to bump off his rivals. The murderer, who returns to the village after a prison term, tries to live a better life. But the economic situation and the social circumstances don't allow this. While he was in prison, his wife was compelled to sell herself to the influential officer's brother—in—law, who runs a prosperous business. She sells herself to his associates also. Joblessness and economic distress force her husband to resort to further murders for cash. The film ends in violence.

ROBINSON: All these films seem to be filled with violence.

CUMARANATUNGA: You could categorize them as "critical realism" inasmuch as they do not provide alternative social possibilities. But social problems, some significant ones, are dealt with. The themes are convincingly presented.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about the films of Gamini Fonseka?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, I've mentioned him before. He's one of our

most famous actor – directors. *Utumaaneni* spotlights miscarriage of justice in the face of corrupt forces. A village girl is raped by an influential affluent man. Her brother institutes a court action, but the criminal escapes punishment. Even the Judicial Medical Officer is bribed. “Utumaaneni” here is judge, representing justice.

In *Saagarayak Meda* (Ocean of Troubles) evils that fathers do are visited upon their children. University students are on strike. Police attack them, wounding some and killing some. At the same time the government hospital doctors are on strike. There are no doctors in hospitals to treat the injured students. Earlier, a police inspector has taken revenge on a doctor who is ultimately jailed. In the students’ strike the doctor’s son and the inspector’s son are both injured. The doctor’s son dies of his injuries. The inspector’s son is in very serious condition, but there is no treatment for him because all doctors are on strike. So the imprisoned doctor is brought to treat the inspector’s son.

Koti Waligaya (Dilemma) shows us that society is in a dilemma. Racial riots. Drug abuse. Prostitution. Other vices. Corrupt politicians. Behind all this are corrupt politicians.

ROBINSON: Who are the audiences for all these films?

CUMARANATUNGA: For a South Asian country, Sri Lanka has a fairly high rate of literacy. About 50% of the Sinhalese people go to see films. When they can afford it. Inflation continues unabated here. Soaring prices daily. Every consumer item has gone up in price. Normally these films are seen by teachers, clerks, workers, farmers, doctors, lawyers, engineers.

ROBINSON: Do film makers in Sri Lanka make a living out of making films?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, they do. Some films have good economic suc-

cess. Some, moderate success. I haven't heard of any film suffering financial losses in this period.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, did your uncle Munidasa Cumaratunga have an interest in movies? And has there been a film about him?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, Munidasa had an interest in cinema. Of course, at the time Sinhala cinema was in its formative period. Dr. Tissa Kariyawasam — you interviewed him — recently gave a public lecture on Munidasa as a journalist and he referred to Munidasa's film reviews that appeared in his *Lak Mini Pahana* in the mid-1930s. No. No film has been made on his life so far. But there have been two TV films about him in the last few years. I've also seen a television version of his *Hath Pana* (Seven Lives). With a few distortions. By the way, I want to repeat that I am not an expert on my uncle.

ROBINSON: Expert or not, you have mentioned the *wadaya*, the controversy, between Munidasa and Martin Wickramasinghe that took place in the 1930s over the authorship of two classical Sinhala poems. Would you like to say something about that?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, I would. The controversy you are asking about is referred to here as the Gira Sandeshaya – Gutttilaya Controversy. In English, the first is Parrot Message. We talked about the message poems before. The second is the story of a Bodhisatwa born as the royal musician Guttila. The point at issue in the controversy was whether these two classical poems were or were not written by the same author. Wickramasinghe said they were. Munidasa said they were not.

The *wadaya* began when Wickramasinghe invited Munidasa to debate this point with him. That was in an article he contributed to the journal *Vidyadarsha* in July 1933. Let me quote from Wickramas

inghe's invitation: "Of the scholars who have studied Sinhala literature... Munidasa Cumaratunga occupies a high place. His critical judgment is reckoned as sound... My view on the authorship deserves an unbiased, fair, and reasoned judgment. I invite Cumaratunga to examine my view."

ROBINSON: Martin Wickramasinghe seems to have been quite magnanimous even if he was, as you say, a political "reactionary" in those days. How did this debate proceed? Where?

CUMARANATUNGA: In *Vidyaadarsha*. Wickramasinghe had presented his views in the July 1933 issue, as I said, and Cumaratunga presented his in the September 1933 issue.

ROBINSON: What were some of their points of disagreement?

CUMARANATUNGA: Wickramasinghe said the two poems were probably written by the same person because there were similar sentence patterns in both, similar ideas in both, similar usages, similar preference for Buddhist stories and similar dislike of Vedic stories, similar descriptions of moonlit nights, sunset, dawn. Wickramasinghe added that the author of *Gira Sandeshaya* wrote *Guttilaya* in his maturity. The author was proud of his independent creative ability. The author's technique was not indebted to any other work in Sinhala literature.

Munidasa Cumaratunga said this examination of internal evidence in both poems was not tenable. In regard to similarities in language, for example — diction, sentence patterns, figures of speech — all Sinhala poets of the time had used them. As for the similar preference for Buddhist stories to Vedic ones, Munidasa pointed to numerous passages in which the *Guttilaya* poet used Vedic stories for illustrative purposes. Munidasa said Wickramasinghe selected passages supporting his view but ignored those refuting it.

In *Gira Sandeshaya*, Wickramasinghe sees the comparison of King Parakramabahu to King Milinda and King Dharmasoka but does not see the places — seven — in which King Parakramabahu is compared to characters found in Vedic stories. Munidasa went on to show thematic differences between these two poems. The *Gira Sandeshaya* expresses admiration for heroism; *Guttilaya* expresses opposition to it. The former poem “shines” with patriotism and nationalism; the latter is “destitute” of these attitudes. The first “opens out paths” toward philosophy, Puranas, history; the second does not do much in this regard.

ROBINSON: Does anybody care deeply about this *wadaya* today?

CUMARANATUNGA: Few people care deeply about it because these books are not prescribed for school examinations now. Of course, those interested in literary criticism and its history in Sri Lanka read it.

ROBINSON: Anyway, you gave a good impression of Munidasa’s way of doing criticism. But shall we go on — or back — to another topic? Earlier you seemed to want to say something more about Munidasa Cumaratunga as a poet.

CUMARANATUNGA: I wanted to say something about the two great movements of poetry in modern Sri Lanka. Munidasa’s culminated in the Hela Havula, the Sinhala Fraternity, which we’ve already discussed. The other was the Samastha Lanka Kavi Sammelanya, the All Ceylon Poets Conference. The Aganuwara Kavi Samajaya, the Colombo Poets Group, which Wimal Dissanayake and Basil Fernando referred to, was the Colombo unit of the All Ceylon Poets Conference. These are still the most influential literary organizations in this country. They both work for the propagation of poetry. But Hela Havula was more powerful and influential for two reasons: it was led by

Munidasa, and its membership included not only poets but also eminent scholars, writers, teachers, both lay and clergy. Besides, Hela Havula was not concerned with poetry alone. It motivated other forms of literature, and its other interests were history, culture, education, social and political matters.

On the other hand, some politicians were not too happy about the influence both these movements were wielding in Sinhala society, particularly the Hela Havula. Influence among Sinhala-speaking teachers, clerks, the clergy — Buddhist and Christian — , Ayurvedic doctors, notaries, farmers, masons, carpenters, other craftsmen. These people in turn exerted considerable influence over the rest of the Sinhala-speaking society. The politicians attempted to take control of the two organizations. To some extent they succeeded with the poets, but not with Hela Havula. Mainly because of Munidasa. He had been working with the Sinhala-educated class and closely associated with them for nearly three decades. And Hela Havula had other capable and influential members like the scholar-journalist Jayantha Weerasekara, the poet-historian Raphael Tennakone, Jayamaha Wellala, and Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant dignitaries. Yet, at a certain stage, some individuals among the poets, instigated by scheming politicians, attacked Hela Havula. The dispute was short-lived, and the differences among them were soon cleared up. Today Hela Havula speakers appear at meetings of the All Ceylon Poets Conference, and members of the Conference speak at Hela Havula meetings. Reverend Father Marcelline Jayakody, the present president of the Poets Conference, is a patron of the Munidasa Cumaratunga Foundation, by the way.

ROBINSON: Would you explain the dispute a little?

CUMARANATUNGA: The Poets Conference was irked by Hela Havula's

moving away from traditionalism in Sinhala poetry. Moving too fast. Hela Havula was looking for new forms, new content, and new thinking. In fact, it aimed at creating a new poetry. Of course, still having links with the tradition, but discarding anything irrelevant in the tradition. This irked the Poets Conference.

ROBINSON: And which politicians were you referring to?

CUMARANATUNGA: Which politicians? Well, some Sinhala Maha Sabha and Communist politicians. It was a section of the Maha Sabha that developed into the S. L. F. P. They felt that the influence of Hela Havula was a hindrance to their progress in the country. Hela Havula's nationalistic stance was objectionable to them.

ROBINSON: Now let's change the subject. When you were discussing Munidasa Cumaratunga as a humorist, you gave us as an example of his satire an outline of his play *Nikam Hekiyawa* (Ability Without Effort). Can you give an example of his, shall we say, broader humor?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes. In his column "Asaranaya ge Kannalawuwa" (The Pauper's Plea) in *Lak Mini Pahana* that I mentioned before, Munidasa reports an incident that you can call broad humor, I guess. A commuter wants to travel by bus from Ratmalana to Wellawatte. The bus fare is 15 cents. The commuter says he has only 10 cents. He pleads with the conductor to carry him for 10 cents. The conductor refuses. Finally, the commuter gets into the bus and pays the fare to Dehiwela which is only 10 cents. A young man who got into the bus with his fiancée to travel the same distance listens to the argument between the commuter and the conductor. He pays his fare of 15 cents. The conductor asks: What about the young lady, sir? The young man replies: She can manage on my lap.

And I should have said something earlier about Munidasa's concept of satire. He did not consider satire as ridicule or insult or abuse.

He intended his satire as a corrective. He did not use it to express dislike or hatred. He said when someone's thoughts, words or deeds are incorrect and harmful to society, he can be the butt of laughter whose purpose is to reform him if possible and to give society a correct perspective on the situation. I'll quote Munidasa: "Ridicule leveled at a jealous person is by no means satire but a sinful act. Banter at wrongs done in the world to prevent their recurrence is praiseworthy. . . ."

I would like to give you a copy of a translation of a satirical story that Munidasa Cumaratunga wrote about the Sinhala language. Perhaps you can find space for it. It would give people a good example of Munidasa's brand of humor.

ROBINSON: What is the title of the story and what does it say about the Sinhala language?

CUMARANATUNGA: *Satara Miniya*. In English, The Story of the Four Gems. Munidasa characterizes four persons: Diniminiya, the editor of *Dinamina*; Siluminiya, the editor of *Silumina*; Nenaheenaya, the person who contributed the bulk of the articles to these two newspapers; and Manaminiya, the editor of *Subasa*, Munidasa himself.

As I've told you, Munidasa was carrying on a campaign to promote correct Sinhala usage. The editors of *Dinamina* and *Silumina* along with a group of Sinhalese university graduates led by one Jinadasa Wickramasinghe launched a campaign in opposition to Munidasa. They emphasized that strict observance of grammar, idiom, correct usage and syntax would impede freedom of expression. Therefore, writers should be encouraged to ignore these practices in order to help creativity in writing.

ROBINSON: Since we're discussing your uncle Munidasa Cumaratunga

again — we always come back to him, don't we? — please say something about the Munidasa Cumaratunga Foundation that was recently established in honor of his centenary. What is the purpose of this foundation? Who are its leaders? Where is it located?

CUMARANATUNGA: The Foundation is incorporated as a limited liability company, and it's been declared an approved charity by the government of Sri Lanka. Its address is 25 Hendrick Peiris Mawatha, Pallimulla, Panadure. I'm a member of the Board of Management. Treasurer. The President is Professor Vitharana. He's chairman of the Department of Sinhala at the University of Ruhuna. The Vice President is Professor Nandadasa Kodagoda, who's head of the Department of Forensic Medicine at the University of Colombo. Our patrons include the Venerable Pandit Warakagoda Seelaratana Maha Thero and Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, who we discussed earlier in reference to the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement that he heads. Members of Munidasa's family are also involved. So is my brother Dahamsiri, who, as I told you, used to work with Munidasa.

As for the purpose of the Foundation, first of all it's a memorial to Munidasa, who tried to make the Sinhalese people here realize the inherent values of our indigenous culture, in particular by inculcating a love for Sinhala, our mother tongue. I'm quoting from one of our pamphlets here.

We also hope that the Foundation will become a center of research in Sinhala language and literature and other aspects of indigenous culture. There'll be a complex including a museum, an assembly hall, and a reference library. Munidasa's sons Gomin, Rawan, Punu and Bindu have contributed his personal library and his published writings and his manuscripts to the museum. There'll also be works by other members of Hela Havula, which I described before.

We hope to have cottages, too, where local and foreign researchers can stay.

ROBINSON: I suppose a lot of money is involved.

CUMARANATUNGA: According to the current estimate, the entire complex will cost about fifty million rupees. Sri Lanka's President, J. R. Jayawardena, has contributed from the President's Fund to put up the Reference and Research Library. Lalith Athulathmudali, the Minister of National Security, has contributed money from the Mahapola Fund to erect the Assembly Hall. There have been several other contributions. The work is in progress.

ROBINSON: Then let's read your uncle's story.

Satara Miniya

"Like clothing, language is meant for people to use. People dress as they wish." So said Diniminiya.

Siluminiya, seated close to him, removed his spectacles. He placed them on the table. "Yes, true. But now there is a tendency to shape people according to dress."

Diniminiya answered. "That's so. Manaminiya will not spare us. He says there is a kind of people who are regarded as civilized. We must dress like them. We must use the language in the manner of these so-called civilized people."

"Manaminiya is a big grammarian. He is concerned with correct and idiomatic Sinhala usage. What damned grammar? What correct usage? I haven't studied any grammar at all. Of Sinhala books I know only a few names. But see the Sinhala I write. How fine!" So said Siluminiya.

Diniminiya stared at Siluminiya under his spectacles and stammered as usual. "Yes. Fine. That's what you think. But meh, meh, meh, meh, my Sinhala is be, be, ter. Yours not so good. Mine be, ter, er."

Siluminiya said, "Ah, your Sinhala! That you must ask Manaminiya

about. He will tell the true quality of your Sinhala. ”

“Manaminiya! Meh, meh, meh, meh. What for the telling? Why should we bother about what he says? Who cares about Manaminiya’s opinions? How many erudite Buddhist monks have praised my Sinhala? You know why your position was given to me. You know it well.” So said Diniminiya.

The last dig went deep into Siluminiya. But he could swallow anything and keep cool. Even when his master (Lake House Boss) shouted “Pig” or “Cur” or “Donkey” or “Ox” he bore up under all the insults without a hum. Lake House Boss knew his men pretty well. So he treated them in the way they deserved . If there was no difference between the place where a pig stayed and the place where a man stayed the treatment was apt.

It is said that once the clean toilets at Vil Paya (Castle by the Lake) were out of bounds to Siluminiya. One can understand why. Thanks to Diniminiya, if anything unfavorable to Siluminiya happened at Vil Paya, it would spread like wildfire. However, Siluminiya tolerated all this.

Siluminiya observed: “Not that. In whatever manner we write Sinhala, Manaminiya will not spare us. He is always critical. However much we say that grammar, idiom, correct usage, syntax and all that are not necessary, even the fellows who can’t observe them also maintain that they are necessary. The murderer says that one should cultivate virtue. Manaminiya says it seems that we are opposed to all these because we don’t know them. We can’t write good clean Sinhala. Because we earn a lot we wear clothes that don’t suit the climate here.”

“Okay!” said Diniminiya. “We’ll do something. We’ll wear our clothes in a different way and pay a visit to Manaminiya.” Siluminiya agreed.

Both removed their coats. Each attempted to put his legs through the arms of his coat. Failing, they wrapped the coats around their waists with

difficulty. They pushed their hands into their trousers. They went to see Manaminiya.

Manaminiya saw them at a distance and ordered his servant to take both of them to the cattle shed.

Both became very angry.

"Hah! Hah!" Diniminiya said. "Manaminiya's cattle shed for us. He took us to be oxen! If we are allowed to walk the streets, we would have come without any clothes. He knows only grammar, idiom and usage. There are so many other subjects. He knows nothing of those. It is better to be without clothes. Sunlight must fall on all parts of the body. All spots that are covered or hidden must receive sunlight. Does Manaminiya know all this? Come, let's go." Diniminiya took Siluminiya, who was pouting his whitish mouth, along with him.

One day Siluminiya pulled Diniminiya's ear and said, "Do you know why Manaminiya sent us to the cattle shed that day?"

"No," answered Diniminiya.

"Because we didn't take wives with us. Let's see him again," proposed Siluminiya. "We will get married and take our wives there also dressed as we like."

Diniminiya agreed.

They married. Diniminiya called his wife "Geheniyak" and Siluminiya called his wife "Gata Wana wu Kanthawa."

Each bought a saree eleven cubits long. Each saree was folded into five and tied on each wife like a loin cloth. Each fellow also wore a banian as a loin cloth.

They went to see Manaminiya with their wives. This time also they were directed to the cattle shed along with their wives.

How Diniminiya and Siluminiya growled at their wives that day.

"Because of them we received such treatment", said Diniminiya.

"How well he treated us the other day."

Siluminiya said "Hush!"

The unfortunate wives snorted.

"Let's go. We'll do what we can." Diniminiya started off. And the others followed.

"His pride is his good Sinhala. We'll ruin Sinhala." When Diniminiya said this, Siluminiya asked, "But isn't it our mother tongue?"

"Mother tongue?" said Diniminiya. "Even if it is the mother tongue who begot us, what's to be done? For the ridicule we have been put to we must sacrifice even our mother." Diniminiya turned to the wives. "We will sacrifice these. Even to the devil."

"Chee, chee," Siluminiya said. "Don't say that. Even though we are unable to write correct and elegant Sinhala, we should not contaminate it or corrupt it."

"Just keep quiet," Diniminiya said. "We'll start a thing called Naveena Sinhala, modern Sinhala. We'll discard grammar, idiom and syntax. There's an ideal chap for this. That Nenaheenaya. Ideal. You'll be behind him to give support. I'll also give my fullest backing from behind the scenes."

Siluminiya raised an objection: "Why don't you stand behind him?"

Diniminiya answered: "My aim is to make you popular. Nenaheenaya is a clever bugger. He'll play his part well. When you stand behind him to give directions, the whole country will think it is your work. Then all the credit will go to you. Everybody will have a high opinion of you. It is the ox driver who gets the credit not the ox. From the day I was promoted to your position because your work was considered to be unsatisfactory, I have been waiting for an opportunity to do you a good turn."

Siluminiya swallowed this bait completely.

Diniminiya was an adept at offering such bait. If gain or victory was

certain he would come forward. If any signs of success appeared, he would say in secret to everybody that he was responsible for all that. If he realized that his plan was being upset, he would say, "I told that fool not to do that." He would attempt to spread that impression all over the country. But he would show that he was a paragon of virtue. That he was of the highest moral quality.

The battle began.

Siluminiya pushed Nenaheenaya forward with a paint brush in his hand to besmear the Sinhala language.

Neneheenaya set about his task with gusto.

Diniminiya would surreptitiously come during the night, place a bucket of filth at Nenaheenaya's disposal to daub and tarnish the Sinhala language.

Some base fellows who were waiting to debase the language applauded him encouragingly.

Cultured Sinhala people turned away in disgust.

ROBINSON: As you said before, it's a pity not to be able to read Sinhala.

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, as I said, Sinhala satire is difficult to translate into English. Maximum effect is lost. Certain words, particularly puns, are very difficult to translate. Of course, ignorance of the details of Sinhala social and cultural life of Munidasa's time makes it difficult for a reader too.

ROBINSON: Anyway, give at least one example of the puns in this satire.

CUMARANATUNGA: One example is the term "Diniminiya" in reference to the editor of *Dinamina*. Correctly, this would be "Diniminiya", *dina*, not *dini*. *Dini* and *mini* connote low and mean, underhand, covert, not straightforward, not upright.

ROBINSON: At the time Munidasa Cumaratunga published this satire, Martin Wickramasinghe was the editor of *Dinamina*. Who was the

editor of *Silumina*? And whom was Munidasa satirizing as Nenaheenaya?

CUMARANATUNGA: Piyasena Nissanka edited *Silumina*. Nenaheenaya represents Jinadasa Wickramasinghe, who I mentioned before. He was a Sinhala graduate of the then University College in Colombo. He contributed his articles against Munidasa to *Silumina*. His articles were entitled *Naweena Sinhala*. Meaning modern Sinhala. Which lacked idiom, grammar, and syntax. He himself was attacked by eminent scholars and writers like David Karunaratne, former editor of *Davasa*, the Sinhala daily of the Independent Group of newspapers. At that time Karunaratne was the editor of *Sinhala Bauddhaya* (Sinhala Buddhist), a newspaper of the Sinhalese Buddhists. He argued that standard grammar and the genuine Sinhala idiom should be used in writing. Otherwise the reader would be confused.

ROBINSON: I have a few other questions about the story. For one, why do Diniminiya and Siluminiya visit Manaminiya wearing their coats around their waists?

CUMARANATUNGA: They want to show Manaminiya that they have scant regard for the way coat and trousers are conventionally worn. Similarly, they want to dress their wives in an unconventional manner when they visit him.

ROBINSON: What does Diniminiya's wife's name mean? And please translate the name of Siluminiya's wife.

CUMARANATUNGA: "Geheniyak" was the title of one of Martin Wickramasinghe's short stories. According to the Sinhala idiom, the term is incorrect. Here, Geheniyak means woman. *Gata Wana wu Kanthawa* is Woman with Wounds.

ROBINSON: What is a *banian*?

CUMARANATUNGA: It's a gauze shirt worn by some people here. Again,

to wear a *banian* as a loin cloth is to be unconventional.

ROBINSON: Well, you can have the last word. You probably have other things you want to say about Munidasa Cumaratunga.

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes, I wanted to point out that in 1940 Munidasa invented an alphabet for a world language. He called it Taru Akuru Wela, strokes with phonetic values. According to Taru Akuru Wela, the most primary of all articulate human sounds is represented by a thick vertical line. This thick line, that is, represents the sound in the Sinhala word *a tha ra*. When this sound is voiced, a small thin vertical line is placed at the bottom right side of the thick vertical one. When this sound is nasalized, this thin line is placed on the top left side. The entire alphabet is developed by placing little thin lines of varying shapes and lengths on either side of the vertical thick line.

Another point I should have made was that Munidasa's favorite subject was mathematics. His first work was a commentary on Pandit Bhaskaran's *Leelawathie*, a treatise on mathematics written in Sanskrit. There's a kind of mathematical accuracy in all of Munidasa's writings and speeches, I think. The peculiarity is that the accuracy is noticeable even in his poetry. I remember a mathematician once telling me that Munidasa's *Vyakarana Vivaranaya*, a treatise on grammar, is mathematics.

ROBINSON: To finish up, can you give us at least a general idea of what has been written about Munidasa Cumaratunga in Sri Lanka?

CUMARANATUNGA: Sinhala newspapers and magazines have published over 500 articles! The bulk of them were written by non-university people. There have been many articles in English, too. The titles of just a few of these will give your academic readers at least an impression of Munidasa. I'll omit the names of writers and journals and dates of publication. "Eminent Man of Letters". "Architect of

Modern Sinhala Poetry". "A Pioneer of Children's Literature in Sinhala". "A Homespun Champion of the Mother Tongue". "Catalyst of Social Change". To sum it all up: "A Fiery Genius".